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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUWAIT 000090

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TAGS: PREL PGOV KISL SCUL SOCI KU

SUBJECT: EDUCATION MINISTER SURVIVES VOTE OF NO  
CONFIDENCE/PAYOUT IS GENDER SEGREGATION

REF: A. KUWAIT 0043

1B. 2007 KUWAIT 1760

Classified By: CDA Misenheimer for reasons 1.4 b and d

Summary and Comment

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11. (C) On January 22, Kuwaiti Education Minister Al-Sabeh survived a vote of no-confidence. On January 8, an Islamist MP ineffectively grilled her on a variety of charges deemed weak by the GOK and Kuwaiti press, and a motion was filed for the vote. With this victory, she became the first minister to survive a grilling and subsequent no-confidence vote since the current Amir came to power in January 2005. Her deft handling of the grilling was rewarded by support from the GOK, but this support came with a price: GOK agreement to enforce a gender segregation law in private universities. In backroom maneuverings, the GOK allied with Islamists, notably the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, to assure Sabeh of victory. The victory was viewed as a success for Sabeh, the GOK, and Kuwaiti women at least in the short term, and the compromise with the Islamists as inevitable and necessary, as many viewed a negative outcome of this grilling and subsequent vote a probable catalyst for an Amiri decision for parliamentary dissolution.

12. (C) The GOK must now hope that in making this Faustian bargain to save the minister, it has not created a larger, long-term problem in Kuwait -- deeper gender segregation and a setback for women's rights -- with very negative consequences for American families and for Embassy Kuwait. We believe that the Amir and the majority of Kuwaitis do not support extending the gender segregation to primary and secondary schools and will be calling on the Education Minister in the coming days to further clarify our next steps. End Summary and Comment.

Victory for Sabeh...but at What Cost?

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13. (U) Per ref A., on January 22, Kuwaiti Education Minister Nouriya Al-Sabeh, the only remaining female minister, was subjected to, and survived a parliamentary vote of "no-confidence." Opponents of Sabeh failed to muster the requisite 25 votes to call for her resignation. The tally of the votes in parliament were 27 in support of Sabeh, and 19 against, with two abstentions. The session was attended by the second highest number of women spectators since the session in which women were given the right to vote in 2005. Sabeh's victory was rewarded by a standing ovation from the gallery.

Background

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¶4. (C) On January 8 and 9, Islamist MP Saad Al-Shraye "grilled" Sabeeh before the National Assembly on accusations of misleading MPs, committing administrative and legal wrongdoing, violating national mores and contributing to the deterioration of Kuwait's education system. His charges were deemed weak by the government, other MPs and the Kuwaiti press. After the grilling, Sabeeh was credited in the press and by her supporters with bearing herself with dignity and eloquently refuting charges targeted at her. The case that Al-Shraye made led to a request by a mix of ten Islamist and pro-government MPs to file a motion of no-confidence, which in the end was not convincing enough to sway the requisite 25 votes needed for her removal. In the January 22 session, MPs opposed to Sabeeh again made weak arguments in support of her no-confidence vote, casting blame on the minister for the mishandling of a sexual assault case that happened at a primary school, charging her with lax standards for not punishing a 14-year-old school girl who allegedly desecrated the Quran, and for over-reacting by reportedly turning another girl over to security authorities for commenting negatively about the United States.

¶5. (C) In the two weeks between the grilling and no-confidence vote, it became clear that parliamentary alliances were being made and broken. Leading the charge for calling the vote were MPs previously loyal to the government but who deemed that this loyalty had not reaped adequate rewards. The likely opponents of Sabeeh (who does not wear a headscarf), conservatives in the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM or Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood) and the Salafi Islamic Group, ended up siding with her and playing a key role in tipping the scales in her favor during the vote. In

KUWAIT 00000090 002 OF 003

the final tally, MPs who supported Sabeeh included nine Islamists, eight liberals, three from the Popular Action Bloc, six independents and the speaker of Parliament. Those who voted against her included a Salafist, four of the Popular Action Bloc and the six New Islamic Group MPs, as well as many of the tribal MPs. Two of the three Salafists abstained.

Litmus Test for Dissolution

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¶6. (C) The grilling, and possible removal from office, of Sabeeh was a potential catalyst to prompt the Amir to dissolve parliament. If Sabeeh's performance during the grilling had been less effective, it is likely that the Amir would have called for dissolution rather than allow her to be ousted from the cabinet. In the end, the GOK, which previously appeared weak and directionless, by demonstrating its support for Sabeeh and winning this grilling and voting, showed signs of strength not seen in recent months.

The Payoff

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¶7. (C) According to royal family member Sh. Mohammed Abdullah Mubarak Al Sabah, the self-described chief government whip or lobbyist, GOK maneuvering secured Sabeeh's victory. According to Mohammed, just prior to the no-confidence vote, he set up a meeting between Minister Sabeeh and members of the ICM to broker a deal for their support. After her victory, Sabeeh announced stricter enforcement of a 2000 gender segregation law at private universities. She stated that she would be reviewing and drafting by-laws for implementation of the law and continuing discussions on drafting a segregation law for primary and secondary private schools.

The Segregation Angle:

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¶ 8. (C) The private university segregation law was passed in 2000, but, according to Mohammed, has been paid only lip service by subsequent Ministers of Education. This lack of implementation has been a source of contention between Islamists and senior Education Ministry officials, who have tended to be liberals. Mohammed said that the implementation of the segregation law was inevitable and private universities in Kuwait that have been built since 2000 have been in compliance "to a certain degree." The Government is not in favor of the law but does not have the political clout to overturn it and has been content to allow it to be ignored to a large extent since its passing. In this case, the GOK's hand was forced, but the government, as it weathered this latest attack, is now at its strongest point in recent months.

¶ 9. (C) Details are still sketchy on what time line, if any, the GOK has agreed to for enforcing gender segregation in private universities, which is in fact already widely, but not uniformly practiced. More dire for American families and the embassy is the possibility of gender segregation in private primary and secondary schools, such as the America School of Kuwait and The English School, which the majority of embassy families attend. Mohammed told Poloff that the Amir is opposed to extending this law to such schools.

¶ 10. (C) For the time being, the Islamists have likely been placated by this compromise, and the GOK's strong showing in the grilling and subsequent voting has placed it on solid footing. Post assesses that the matter will lie quiet until Islamists feel they have the upper hand, and then will push to extend gender segregation to all schools. According to Mohammed, even if the Islamist agenda is successful, gender segregation at all levels is not likely to happen for several years.

#### Media Coverage

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¶ 11. (U) The news of the Education Minister's victory received wide and extensive coverage in the print press and media. All eleven daily Arabic newspaper and the three English ones reported the news on the front page. The story was the focus of all Local News Sections in every newspaper. Al Watan, Al Rai, and Al Qabas each covered the story with three full pages on the parliamentary vote, and provided commentary from MPs and the public. In general, the media considered the decision by the parliament a victory for

KUWAIT 00000090 003 OF 003

democracy in Kuwait. Editorials in general were favorable of the decision, and varied on whom to blame for putting the minister on the stand. Islamists were quick to respond (unconvincingly) that they were not targeting the Minister due to her gender, but rather because they were trying to implement reforms for the public interest.

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